

## Pancake Tortoise

(*Malacochersus tornieri*)

**Habitat and Distribution:** Dry scrub brush on rocky hills/outcroppings in Southern Kenya and Northern and Eastern Tanzania

**Size:** Up to 7 in. long and one pound. Height of shell is typically 1-1 ½ in.

**Wild Diet:** Fresh and dry grasses and other vegetation. Obtain most of the water they need from the foods they eat.

**Predators:** Most likely mongoose and other small African predators.

**Life Span:** In captivity, they have lived more than 25 years.

**Reproduction:** Breeding season is January and February, with nesting in July and August. During the breeding season, the males sometimes fight among themselves. Females usually lay a single egg, burying it in 3-4 inches of loose, sandy dirt. A female can lay multiple eggs over the course of a breeding season, with a new egg being laid every 1½ to 2 months. The eggs are about 2 inches long. Captive bred pancake tortoise eggs have incubated from 99 to 237 days before hatching. Hatchlings are about 1½ inches long and have a domed shell, unlike their parents.

**Behavior:** Their shells are softer and more flexible than the shells of other tortoises, and as such, they do not provide much protection from predators. If threatened, a pancake tortoise does not withdraw into its shell like other tortoises. Instead, it will dash for the nearest rocky shelter. Because they have a lighter shell, they can also move more quickly than thicker-shelled tortoises. These tortoises stay close to their rocky shelters and seem to have their “favorite” nooks. Pancake tortoises are also more agile than other tortoises. They can flip themselves over quickly if they land on their backs. They are also one of the few social tortoises, in that they can live together in groups, sharing crevices and basking sites. It was once thought that these tortoises could puff their body up with air to lodge themselves in a rocky crevice, but recent findings have disputed this. Instead, the tortoise plants its spiky legs solidly into the crevice so that it is almost impossible to dislodge.

**Conservation Connection:** CITES Appendix II, meaning that they are not necessarily now threatened with extinction but that may become so unless trade is closely controlled. The major threat to the pancake tortoise is the pet trade.

**Interesting Facts:** Pancake tortoises have flat shells instead of domed shells like other tortoises. The carapace is brown with a pattern of radiating dark lines around each scute. The plastron is pale yellow, and the head, limbs and tail are yellow-brown. Males are usually smaller than females, and have larger and longer tails.

